

HERESIES OF THE PLYMOUTH BRETHREN.

5

A SERMON

Preached in St. Paul's Church, Kingston, March 6, 1870

BY
THE BISHOP OF ONTARIO.

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SERMON.

[The following Sermon is published at the request of many who heard it including the Lay Delegates and Churchwardens of St. Paul's Church. It does not purport to be an exact reproduction of the extemporaneous one delivered on March 6th; but the author believes that it represents the sense of that Sermon, and approaches as nearly to the language then employed as he can recollect.]

"But there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you."—I Cor. ii, 19.

You see, then, Brethren, that there is some good even in heresies. They serve a purpose in the Church; they bring sound doctrine, by the very force of contrast, into prominence. If it were not for plague and pestilence, we should not give heed to sanitary precautions. Even the thunderstorms purify the atmosphere. In fact there are "books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything." Heresies help to distinguish between the wheat and the tares; they make manifest "the double-minded men who are unstable in all their ways," and them also who are "rooted and grounded" in the faith. They show whether we know in what we have believed, or whether we be "like children tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive." Moreover, our liability to them should keep the watchmen of Zion on the alert. The avidity with which they are swallowed when an old one is revived, or a new one started, should teach the necessity of keeping our people forearmed. This can only be done by systematically instructing them in the distinctive doctrines of the Church. If the sermons preached in our pulpits be such that they might without remark be delivered in any sectarian place of worship, listeners will draw the inference that the only point worth considering is where

they can find the best delivery. Now, a new heresy, or rather an old one revived, is meeting with great attention in this city, and I am justified in trying to turn the fact to good account by improving the occasion. Why? In the first place I have been asked to do so by many; but as I am not bound to do everything that I am asked to do, I shall give you some other reasons. At my Ordination I promised "to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrines contrary to God's word," and the heresies of the Plymouth Brethren are as erroneous, strange, and contrary to God's word as can well be imagined. In the next place, I am not the aggressor. The gauntlet has been thrown down, and church members seduced to listen to Preachers who conduct their services during church hours. They plainly aim at compassing our city to make proselytes, a city too which in proportion to its population, is better provided I think with the means of grace than any other in the Dominion. You will take notice that they generally select such places as the sphere of their operations. There are, alas! too many places in the country districts called "destitute settlements," but such have no attractions for these preachers. There are hamlets in the backwoods where the settlers are thankful to have the Gospel preached even once a month, but these men prefer to distract their hearers in the comfortable haunts of city life. They should not, therefore, be left unchallenged, because experience tells us that no heresy is too contemptible to be dangerous, and you must not think me uncharitable. There is no room for charity in a question of fact. When our doctrines are pronounced soul-destroying and unscriptural, there can be gentleness and good temper and pity, but no charity in the sense of compromise, when we make reply. If I were made aware that a large number of the members of this Congregation were in the habit of attending a Romish place of worship, I should think it my duty to warn them against it. I should use very strong language. I should fire you against the system by holding it up to the mirror of reason and Scripture, and bid you withdraw from countenancing by your presence, a church which I believe to be the same as it ever was in its haughty intolerance, and you would not deem me uncharitable. And when I am told that a large number of you are countenancing by your attendance a system which is equally pernicious, though in another direction, I am not to be thought uncharitable if I denounce it and warn you. I am not aware that the "Brethren" have any written creed, hence there is difficulty in getting at their exact tenets, but I

shall dwell upon a few of their peculiarities which are admitted.

I. The moral law, they say, is not the rule of the believers' life. I am sorry to say that they act accordingly in their system of making converts. *At first* there is not much to alarm in their proceedings. They preach the Gospel without money and without price. Their cry is, "Come to Jesus," but by and by when the time has been skilfully chosen by these adepts in the system of reserve, the whisper is, "Come out of the Church." This would have been too startling at the outset, so it is reserved till, "they have crept into houses and led captive silly women" and sillier men. But let us see what the Scripture says on this subject of the binding force of the Moral Law. If the Moral Law be not the rule of life, the Scriptures are not the rule of faith. Our blessed Lord summed up the Moral Law when He said "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind," and "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." In the Sermon on the Mount He laid down the grand maxim, "Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets." He emphatically disclaimed all intention of destroying the law and the prophets, but on the contrary, said He came to fulfil them, and promised "that whosoever shall do and teach them, shall be called great in the kingdom of Heaven." St. Paul echoes his master's teaching by telling us that "the law is holy, and the commandments holy, and just, and good." It is doing dishonor to Christ to forget what he *said*, in thinking on what he *did*, and the church would warn us all against this error, for in her seventh article she says: "No christian man is free from the obedience of the commandments which are called moral," and in her most solemn act of worship—the holy communion, she prefaces the sacrament with the recitation of the Decalogue, and puts into our mouths the prayer that God would write all these His laws in our hearts.

Another peculiarity of the Brethren is that the Lord's prayer is unfit to be used by the believer. His sins are already forgiven; therefore he need not, ought not, to say "forgive us our trespasses." They would have us believe that our Lord, when asked by His disciples to teach them to pray, gave a model prayer, and that twice, which God the Holy Ghost caused the inspired writers to put on record, to be a stumbling

block in our way, to lead us astray, since men would naturally use the prayer when there is not even a hint given that it was to be only temporary! Similarly they deny the existence of a sacred ministry. They set at naught all that part of the New Testament which treats of the ordination of apostles, presbyters and deacons. They ignore the Epistles to Timothy and Titus, without informing us how they can account for the Holy Spirit allowing all these things to be written when they are of no manner of use to us, but rather mislead us. Their whole system may be summed up by saying they utterly deny the Church Catechism. Indeed with them a catechism is useless, because their religious tenets can only be held by adults. Only believers are saved, say they. But children could never understand the metaphysical religion of these teachers. No one, say they, is saved till he can say, "I do believe, I will believe, that Jesus died for me," in a totally different sense from saying He "tasted death for every man," and therefore died for me. As has been well said by the present Regius Professor of Divinity in Dublin University, "The majority of these teachers hold that Jesus did not die for all; that all for whom he did die will eventually be saved, and that justifying faith is the belief that you yourself are included in that chosen number. Thus to those words, "I believe that Jesus died for me," is ascribed a transubstantiating efficacy such as that which in Roman Catholic theology is ascribed to the words "*Hoc est Corpus meum.*" The words appear only to assert a fact, but they do make the fact which they assert, and it would not be true if it were not asserted."

Again, according to these men, a Christian is under no moral or indeed any obligation to observe the Lord's Day. Being *saved* he can dispense with such a "beggarly element," as every day is to him a Lord's day. But I greatly fear that instead of the other days being elevated to the religious level of the Lord's day, that day is degraded to the secular level of other days. And we are again perplexed to know why the Holy Spirit has recorded the fact that the primitive Christians met together on *the first day of the week* for prayer and holy communion; why St. Paul selected that day as the most suitable for offertory collections in the churches of Corinth and Galatia; or why St. John is mentioned as having been "in the spirit on the *Lord's day.*" Was this information given to teach us, or to mislead us? for the Spirit must have known our liability at all events to follow the intimations of an inspired record.

II. The next error of the Brethren which I notice is their

denial of the existence of God's Church till the death of Christ, or of Abraham and all those worthies of the Old Testament enumerated by St. Paul in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews having any place in Christ's Church. I confess that I cannot see what object they have in depriving such saints of their church membership; but I deny the fact so stated. Our Lord named His own society, and whatever the Syro-Chaldaic word used by Him may have been, His inspired Apostle translated it *ecclesia*, the very same Greek word used in the Septuagint (which was the only Bible familiar to the Jews of our Lord's day), as the equivalent of the Hebrew word *Kahal*, or the Jewish community, God's people. This rendering of the name of the Jewish people by *ecclesia* occurs one hundred and thirty-seven times in the Greek Scriptures of the Old Testament, and St. Stephen says expressly that Moses was with the *ecclesia* in the wilderness. Our Lord adopted it for the designation of His society, the Church, thus intimating a continuous identity. And so it is capable of proof that the Christian Church is the Jewish *ecclesia* developed, spiritualized and catholicized. The one was prospective, the other is retrospective. "To Abraham and his seed were the promises made;" and says St. Paul again, "Now, if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise." "Your Father Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad," said our Lord, while St. Paul, speaking of Abraham and the saints of the Old Testament, says "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them." All these, and many more such like passages of God's Word are made void by the Brethren, or rather are flatly contradicted. But the Church's teaching is unmistakably scriptural on this point. When we sing the song of Zachariah, or the blessed Virgin, we call Abraham "our forefather," and "Abraham and his seed," our forefathers. He was not our ancestor according to the flesh, for we are Anglo-Saxons; but in spiritual ancestry we are all one family. In almost all our system and worship we can trace a Jewish complexion and original. The Psalms which constitute so large a portion of our praises are Jewish hymns, which we christianize by appending to each a Gloria Patri. Our custom of reading a lesson from the Old and New Testaments proves our equal respect for both, as well as imitates the habit of the Jewish synagogue where lessons were read from the Law and the Prophets. The Lord's Prayer itself is not an original composition, but is a compilation from the public prayers of the

Jewish Church, our Lord thus intimating that His *ecclesia* was not to be an original structure, but to be built upon the foundations of the Apostles and *Prophets*. The Passover and Circumcision are the true originals of the Lord's Supper and Baptism. Confirmation is an adaptation of the Jewish rite whereby Jews at the age of twelve years came (as our Lord himself did) to the Temple, underwent an examination in the Law, and received the Priest's blessing. Bishops, Priests and Deacons are the co-relatives of the High Priest, Priests and Levites. The Christian Church bears somewhat the same relation to the Jewish *ecclesia* that the New Testament does to the Old. The Old is *unfolded* by the New, and the New is *enfolded* in the Old. But my limits prevent my attempting to exhaust my proofs. Suffice it to say that two of the Evangelists before giving the history of the Saviour's life take care to continue the identity of the dispensation by recording the genealogy of Christ, tracing the second Adam to the first Adam, and to the Father of the faithful, while the Apostles, when striving to convert the Jews to Christianity, always commence by a *recapitulation*. Thus St. Stephen at Jerusalem and St. Paul at Antioch, recapitulate, in order to show how natural and philosophical was the transition from the Jewish to the Christian Church. In short, there should not be a blank page between the Old and New Testaments. Time should no more disconnect the Prophet Malachi from St. Matthew than it should sever Exodus from Genesis. The unity of the Church of God in all ages is undeniable. In the wondrous scene of the Transfiguration the three Dispensations or phases of the same Church—the Mosaic, the Prophetical, and the Christian—appeared as one in aim and interest. They speak of the atonement, the "decease which He should accomplish at Jerusalem." And we trace this identity still farther back, even to the Patriarchial Dispensation, because St. Paul tells us that "the Scripture preached before the Gospel unto Abraham," fully justifying our solemn Good Friday prayer, in which we as members of Christ's Church call ourselves the "*true Israelites*."

III. The next heresy of the Brethren which I am compelled to warn you against is, that a Christian ought not to pray either *to* the Holy Spirit or *for* the Holy Spirit. This shocking error, which involves a denial of a triune God, springs from the idea that a *saved* man has already received the Spirit, and that it is absurd to ask for what he possesses sufficiently for salvation. But whether we possess the Holy Spirit's influence or not, can only be decided by ascertaining whether we exhibit

"the fruits of the Spirit," and they are love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, etc. Now, the Brethren must assume that they possess these gifts and show these fruits to perfection if they will not ask for larger measures of them. They so far exceed St. Paul in attainments that they think they are already perfect. He made it a rule to "forget those things which were behind, and to reach forward to things that were before," and even to co-operate with the grace of God by "keeping under his body and bringing it into subjection," lest he should after all be "a castaway," "mortifying the flesh with the affections and lusts." The Brethren know nothing of "growth in grace," or of "adding to their faith virtue, and to virtue knowledge, and to knowledge temperance," etc. These graces they possess so perfectly that they deem it wrong to pray for an additional supply! Against this soul-destroying delusion the whole system of the Church is opposed. The principle of our religious life is the prayerful use of means whereby we "may daily increase in His Holy Spirit more and more, until we come to His everlasting Kingdom." And regarding the blasphemy which forbids prayer to the Spirit, I can only bring myself to say in protest, "O God, the Holy Ghost, proceeding from the Father and the Son, have mercy upon us," and "I believe in the Holy Ghost, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified."

IV. An error quite as bad as any of the former is that of maintaining that the Church consists of the *saved* only. Although it is vain to quote scripture against people who accept as scripture such passages only as suit their views. Let me remind you that our Lord took what seems like pains to warn us against this folly. The Kingdom of Heaven, or the visible Church, is by Him compared to a "net cast into the sea which gathers of *every* kind," and to a field in which "wheat and tares grow together till the harvest," or the end of the world. But these heretics forestall the angels' work and anticipate the Judgment. They gather the saved into the barn of the visible Church, and a small one truly it is—the sect of the Plymouth Brethren! The Lord, we are told by St. Luke, "added to the Church" such as were being saved, or on the road to salvation. But, according to the Brethren, you must first be saved and then add yourself to the Church—that is, to themselves. It is scarcely necessary to say how different was St. Paul's estimate of Church members. He writes to the "Church of God at Corinth, to them that are sanctified and called to be saints"—an address sufficiently explicit; and yet the whole letter is one

continuous reproof of their sins and irregularities, while he at the same time tells them that they were "the body of Christ, and members in particular." And now, my brethren, let me sum up the errors you are called upon to avoid, as you love your own salvation. Should any come to you even in the garb of an angel of light preaching another gospel—one which denies that Christians are bound to the Moral Law as a rule of life, which sets aside the observance of the Lord's Day and disallows an authorized ministry, "receive him not into your houses nor wish him God speed." Reflect upon the awful gulf which separates the Christian who *can* say the Lord's Prayer from him who *cannot*—the Christian who believes that "in the Old Testament everlasting life is offered to mankind by Christ," from the man who "feigns that the old fathers did look only for transitory promises." How low the descent from the high aim of growing in grace through the use of divinely appointed means ordained by Christ Himself to the conception of a salvation all at once, matured and evidenced by the repeating of set phrases—a salvation procured *before* your admission into the sect, and neither forwarded nor wrought out "in fear and trembling" *afterwards*. How shocking is the presumption which practically ignores the Old Testament, and so much of the New as is made up of quotations from it—a mass of extracts which if collected together would occupy a space equal to that of St. Matthew's Gospel, which says in effect that Christ was a bad religious economist; that His commissioning Apostles to commission others, and to give us rules of Church order, was either unnecessary or only a temporary arrangement with which we can dispense; and that salvation may be had without the possibility of forfeiture, by submitting ourselves to the manipulation of preachers who know how to kindle a fire of vehement emotion.

It is not probable that I am now addressing any Church members who have given in their adhesion to such delusions as I have described. But should there be any such in this great congregation, I candidly confess that I have not the slightest hope of making an impression upon them. I may have given them arguments; but the same incapacity which caused them to embrace the delusion will frustrate the force of any argument. I cannot understand the character of one who, under the stimulant of excitement, in a moment gives the lie to the profession of a lifetime, which in an instant discovers that the Bible has been for twenty or thirty years to him a sealed book, exhibits himself as a victim of the absurdity of private judg-

ment, and, without the consideration he would give to a worldly speculation, flings off the faith of his fathers, "like a garment unsuited to the climate"; aye, and hands himself over, soul and conscience, as unreservedly and as pitiably into the hands of adventurers, as ever did Romish devotee to his Confessor.

And if I am now speaking to any church members who encourage these sectaries by listening to, while unheeding, their utterances, let me warn you against the sin of leading weaker brethren into a temptation which you are strong enough to resist yourselves. The mere attendance on religious novelties argues a secret dissatisfaction with your professed principles. Now, I believe that any Churchman who is not satisfied with the Church's Creed as a sufficient means of conveying to him all the spiritual life he needs, does not understand it; and I therefore beseech such, that before they break away from their present anchorage, they will devote the time now spent in listening to contradictions of everything we hold sacred, to a prayerful struggle to understand their own religion. When "peace and joy in believing" shall thus have been obtained, let the victims of these heresies be the object of your solicitude and prayers, for a deeper downfall yet awaits many of them since *misbelief* is the fruitful parent of *unbelief*.

And now, in conclusion, I offer a practical admonition taken from God's Holy Word. If you believe that God does not now employ miraculous agency to enforce the Gospel of His Son, then ask for the credentials of those who undertake to preach it. "How shall they preach except they be sent," asks St. Paul, and no ambassador sends himself. "No man taketh this honor unto himself but he that is called of God, as was Aaron," and God now calls no man save by the ordinary commission from His Church. If a man thinks he has a divine commission we may justly call upon him for a miraculous attestation for God's having thus deviated from His ordinary providence in that man's behalf. But if he say that he can afford no proof of his mission but that derived from an internal feeling that it is the Spirit who is prompting him, then let St. John, who of all the apostles had most experience of heresies, be heard saying, "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits *whether they are of God*: because many false prophets are gone out into the world." Think it just possible that the present heresy may have been permitted in order to make manifest those who "are approved," and that its motive power may be, not the Holy Spirit, but the spirit of novelty or

notoriety, the spirit of self-conceit or sectarian ambition. I have now discharged my duty in "warning every man," that he may be presented at last "Holy and unblameable and irreproachable in His sight, if you continue in the faith, grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the Gospel which ye have heard." Amen.

